

Still a good, if much smaller, U.S. Sugar deal

What a roller coaster ride the U.S. Sugar land deal has taken. The South Florida Water Management District's board approved a much smaller purchase Aug. 12. While the pared-down deal remains controversial, it is still better to have the land in the public's "bank" for future Everglades restoration projects than leave it in private hands.

Gov. Charlie Crist dropped a bombshell in 2008 when he announced that the state, via the district, had agreed to purchase the giant sugar company's property -- 180,000-plus acres -- for \$1.75 billion for conversion into reservoirs and pollution treatment marshes.

This drew strong protests and legal challenges from Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Indian Tribe and equally strong praise from environmental groups. Critics called it a bailout for the financially strapped sugar giant.

Supporters hailed it as a stroke of genius by Mr. Crist that would dramatically improve the Everglades massive restoration plan.

Less than dazzling

Then the economy went sour. The deal got reduced in size and cost to \$536 million. But court rulings and a worsening economy further dimmed the once-dazzling deal.

So what the district board ended up agreeing to last week is a \$197 million cash purchase of 26,790 acres of citrus groves and cane fields.

The district won't raise taxes for this deal -- even if some politicians like Rick Scott keep harping that it will. And it has options to buy more land at \$7,400 an acre over the next three years or at market price over the next decade -- if the economy greatly improves or the federal government decides to pony up.

Pollution 'hot spots'

The two parcels -- 17,900 acres of groves in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of fields in the huge Everglades farming area -- will be used, eventually, to help clean up two "hot spots" of pollution: in the C-139 basin, where phosphorus loads have been historically high, and in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, which will comply with a recent court order to improve water quality.

Unfortunately, the truncated land purchase won't do much to improve water quality in Lake Okeechobee or the two estuaries the lake drains into.

In the short term, U.S. Sugar will lease back some of the land, paying the district \$1 million annually as well as property taxes and other assessments. That may seem unfair to taxpayers, but it isn't. It will take years for cleanup projects to be designed for the two parcels -- not to mention accumulating the money to pay for them. Meantime, the district gets \$1 million in annual

revenue.

Mr. Crist's dazzler of a deal was perhaps way too ambitious for it ever to succeed. But we still think he deserves much credit for having the vision and chutzpah to try to pull it off. It was bold. Likewise, the district's board deserves credit for refusing to back away from the ever-diminishing goal despite bruising legal losses and criticism.

The land will one day help clean up the phosphorus that flowed from it during its days as farmland -- a win-win for Florida's River of Grass.

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